

Needham, R. J.

Wheat

Last week, I stood on top of a hill between Calgary and Lethbridge. Everywhere I looked, there was wheat . . . gold wheat in the great fields, dead ripe, waiting to be cut; long rows of wheat in stook, waiting to be threshed; bright yellow stubble where the binder or the combine had travelled. Here and there was a granery, perched in the middle of a field, fairly bursting with grain. The whole landscape was flooded with the soft golden light of September -- rich and golden and enormously at peace.

Yet all the prodigal riches I saw from the lonely hilltop were nothing, nothing at all, compared with the enormous crop of wheat which the western provinces have grown this year. The Dominion government has figured the wheat crop at something like 550 million bushels, the second largest wheat crop Canada has ever produced.

Alberta will produce over one third of that crop. Within the confines of this province, more wheat has been produced this year than in all Australia. This has come about through a philosophy, an economy, a way of life -- Big Wheat.

There is a lot being said about wheat right now. Conferences are held, and resolutions are passed. Far more are being warned by their own leaders, that they must get away from the idea of Big Wheat. All this is very important. But there is, I think, a tendency to overlook one thing . . . the fact that this giant crop, this terrific accumulation of food, was produced by a mere handful of people, living in splendid isolation on the immeasurable plains.

This is a challenging and vigorous achievement, a legend of our own time, a story that most of the world's people could never comprehend, a gigantic feat of skill and courage and energy. This is Big Wheat.

The hill I stood on to see the crop is a little lift of land called Thigh Hill, a little lift of the land near Vulcan, just about half-way between Calgary and Lethbridge. This place Vulcan is a living example of Big Wheat . . . a handful of people, less than a thousand all told, who have produced an average of a million bushels of wheat every year since the plow first started to bite the new land. Thirty years! Perhaps we can begin to understand this accomplishment if we go back 30 years to the great land rush in Souther Alberta. The sea of grass was there, waiting to be tilled, waiting for the sharp bite of the blow, the silver sound of the manner. The land was ready, and the people came to take title to their share.

There was no road, no railway, at Vulcan then. Just the waving grass, high as a man's waist. The settlers came in 45 miles from the nearest station -- young people mostly, from Ontario and from the States. They were cheerful, energetic; nothing much to start on but their courage and their ambition -- and the land. A man was wealthy if he had four horses.

Well, they got on the land. Good land it was, too -- a rich chocolate loam which promised ample rewards. They put up their shacks, plowed in their gardens, and settled down.

There were hardships. The loneliness, of course, and the hard winters. The summer of 1910, when the crop was dried out. The summer of 1911 when the drop was frozen. There were prairie fires -- great walls of flame that roared along through the dry grass, carrying terror and destruction. They plowed great strips of land to act as fireguards against the flames. About the drouth and the frost, they couldn't do gery much but stay right with the land and hope for the best.

So in time, their hopes were amply fulfilled. The third year, the crop was good. It stayed good after that -- a poor year now and again -- but all in all, Nature was with them. And the land was rich, prodially rich. Thirty five bushels to the acre was a normal crop. Forty and fifty bushel crops were nothing unusual. One man told of land which produced 70 bushels to the acre. Another took 55,000 bushels of wheat off a 1,000 acres of sowing.

By the time that war broke out in 1914, the land was all settled up and the railway had come in. Schools and churches were going up, roads were being made. And every fall, the wagons rumbled into town with great loads of Red Fife Number One.

As the war raged in Europe, Canada's wheat became of prime importance. Farmers were urged to produce every bushel they could. Down at Vulcan, they heard the call and set themselves to the task. Millions of bushels of wheat went pouring through the elevators. Farmers bought more land, more machines. They were rich.

In 1916, one man farming ten miles out of town had his whole place electrified. Other farmers, buying more land than they could handle, decided that machinery would take the place of the horse, and purchased accordingly. Trips to California became popular for the winter months, and special trains were run to the Pacific.

As the war ended, Vulcan found itself prosperous and well-favored. The world wanted wheat; Vulcan had it. Land that was free in 1908, and sold for \$14. an acre in 1914, sold for \$100. an acre in 1922. Big farmers were springing up -- men who reckoned their crops in ten thousands of bushels. Some farmers bought a new car every year; others bought a new section every year.

There were giants in those days. Machinery was coming in fast, but there were plenty of horses left. Every fall, an army of harvest workers swept down on the town, crowding every room and even sleeping in the skating rink. There was work for all of them -- millions of acres to be cut, stooked and threshed . . .

The people of Vulcan look back fondly to those days of manpower and horsepower . . . they still talk about the great long rows of stooks stretching for mile after mile. They remember the great teams of horses -- ten and twelve and sixteen of them pulling along in harness. They will show you a picture of the team that came into Vulcan one November day of 1922 . . . a train of eight wagons, brimming over with wheat, drawn by a team of 30 horses.

Those were the days. They tell about the big crops of 1923 -- 2,800,000 bushels went through Vulcan's elevators that year. They tell about a man who had 23 binders to get in his crop. They tell about the man who lost a grain check for \$700.00 and never even noticed it till years afterwards, when he came across it, stuffed in a corner of his kitchen.

Well, they coasted along with good crops and good prices, till it seemed nothing would break their run of fortune and success. In 1929, the bottom fell out of world markets. In August of that year, Winnipeg wheat was \$1.58. Two years after that, it was 55 cents. The price collapse was bad enough to ruin many a farmer. One family dropped \$35,000 almost overnight.

But that wasn't all. Nature, which had always smiled on Vulcan, now wore a frown. The hard years came. Day after day, the sun shone down like molten brass out of a hot blue sky. The farmers saw their crops wilting and burning before their eyes. They scanned the horizon

every day in July for some sign of rain . . . the smallest cloud, even. But the rain failed to come.

The dust blew. It swept right into the houses, blown along by winds which never seemed to stop. The men saw it blow away their crops; the women saw their housework ruined every day. The grasshoppers came. They sailed into the crop, and ate their fill. They came right into the houses. Army worms came and ate the gardens. The people of Vulcan began to feel as if they would never get straightened out again.

But if they felt it, they wouldn't admit it. They stood up under all this, and stayed with the land. Next year might be better. They weren't going to quit. They weren't through, by any manner of means. They were still getting a fair enough crop off the land -- better than most places, however small it might seem -- and they stayed with it.

About three years ago, their patience was rewarded. The hoppers moved away; the rain came back; the dust stopped blowing. They saw their wheat coming again as it had in the old days -- fine and tall and golden. The elevators started to fill right to the roof. Once again it was wheat --- Big Wheat.

This year, Vulcan is going to take off a crop of wheat of about 1,750,000 bushels. It's stacking up in improvised granaries all over the district in barns and garages. I saw one great barn, big as the big barns of Southern Ontario, stacked to the roof with wheat. There are more like it.

This year's crop was put in the ground and taken out almost entirely by machinery. Stooking is only done by the farmers who want straw.

The rest of the crop is harvested with the great combines which drove

the horses and harvesters off the land. I was talking to one man at Vulcan who expects a 50,000 bushel crop. He spends \$1,500 a year on gasoline alone. It is nothing unusual for a man down at Vulcan to be farming 4,000 acres; it is nothing unusual for a man to have a 100,000 bushel crop. Big Wheat.

Well, maybe the days of Big Wheat is drawing to a close. Nobody knows for sure what's going to happen, and they are a little worried. They are a little worried. Perhaps they have reason to be. But they are proud, and they have reason to be proud.

They started off with nothing -- nothing but the land, the sea of grass. They added to that their own spirit and imagination, their terrific energy, their willingness to work as men had never worked before. They got machinery to help them. And out of all this came their tremendous achievement, a little handful of people who had turned the sea of grass into a sea of golden grain. Gamblers? Perhaps. Adventurers? Yes.

But the kind of gamble, the kind of adventure that produces 30million bushels in 30 years . . . isn't that the kind of gamble and adventure which has made Canada a great nation, rich and strong and powerful?